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Sermon after the death
of

J. G. Stevenson.





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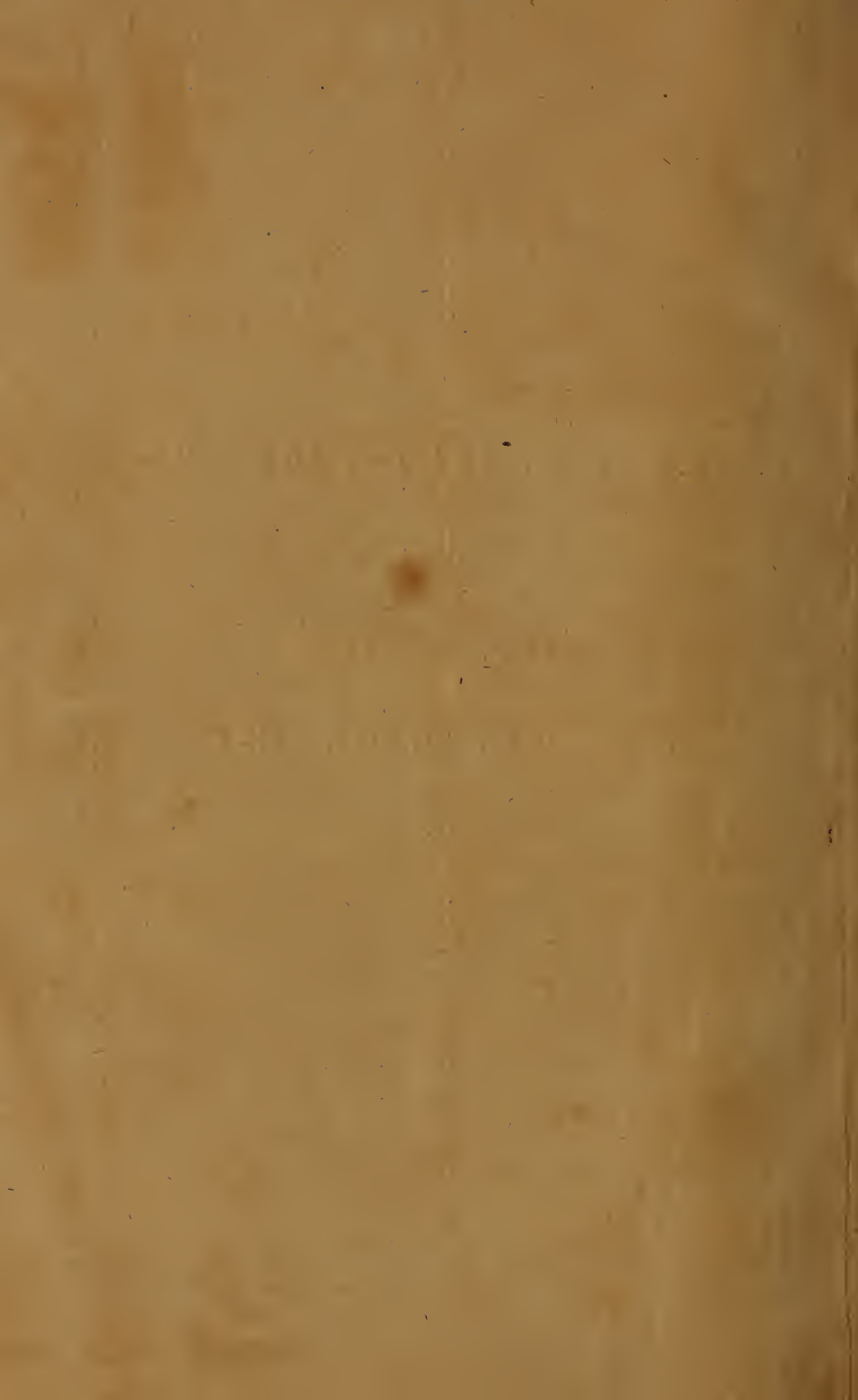
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REV. N. L. FROTHINGHAM'S

SERMON

AFTER THE DEATH OF

J. G. STEVENSON, M. D.



THE HELP OF GOD UNDER THE LOSS OF FAITHFUL MEN.

A

S E R M O N

PREACHED TO THE FIRST CHURCH,

AFTER THE DEATH OF

J. G. STEVENSON, M. D.

BY N. L. FROTHINGHAM,

[PRIVATE.]

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S E R M O N .

PSALM XII, 1.

HELP, LORD ; FOR THE FAITHFUL FAIL FROM AMONG THE CHILDREN
OF MEN.

THE Psalmist uttered this supplication and appeal to heaven, on account of the evil times on which he had fallen, and the bad men who surrounded him. The world seemed to him to be degenerate ; the ancient fidelity to be declining ; and society to be losing its brightest ornaments by having its members lose their integrity. He saw corruption spreading itself abroad, the ranks of the true-hearted grown thinner and fainter, “the wicked walking on every side, and the vilest men exalted;” and he cried, “help, Lord!”

But it is not only by the declensions of sin, by the abounding of deceit and oppression, and the decay of honor and charity, that “the faithful fail from among the children of men.” They are taken away in the midst of all that they were doing for the joy of their friends and the benefit of the society

they lived in. They fail by reason of death. There was no other defection, to which they seemed capable of yielding ; so fixed were they in their principles, so steady in their dutiful work. But this comes in, and will not be refused. It breaks off the purposes that were the most righteously set ; it turns aside the course that was the most usefully directed. The high heart, and the strong intellect, and the skilful hand, it brings down under its dominion and into its dust. And then, when the community misses them from the number of its sons ; and private affection, bending over their memories, says, there may be others as worthy as they to fill their place in the public eye, but who is there to supply it to mine ? — when they, who had never disappointed a hope nor broken a promise before, have now deceived our expectation, and turned false, in the only way they could be false, — to the assurances they had inspired us with ; — when friends and companions thus cease to have any interest in us longer, and well-tried helpers withdraw their aid ; — then do we not look above every inferior assistance, and mistrust any deliverance that is less than almighty, and cry, “ help, LORD ? ” We feel as if no one can be truly called faithful, but He, who never dies. We ask in our grief, why we should give that vain title to those who “ fail from among the children of men ; ” — who cannot fulfil the intentions on which we relied ; — who cannot keep their word, nor keep themselves ; but go away into the hollow ground, with their pledges unredeemed, leaving nothing with

us but the images of a sorrowful but precious remembrance. Call God true, we say with the apostle, and every man faithless ;—for you cannot put your trust in so uncertain a being. There is no help in him. He forsakes you ;—for he cannot stay when he is summoned. He forgets you ;—at least in the dreary obliviousness of the grave. His word is air, and his arm is dust, and his life is a shadow, and his memory is a dream. Cease from him. His “breath is in his nostrils, and wherein is he to be accounted of?” “Help, Lord!”

But we should bear in mind, at the same time, that this divine Power would not have us call upon him in a temper of weariness or complaint at what is around us. He would not have us even lean upon him out of a dejected and repining heart ;—as if there were nothing here to bear reposing on, to deserve affection, or reward expectancy ; as if the world were all a waste, because death sets his foot upon its highest and lowest places. God would not be honored by having his creatures slighted of, nor can he be honored by dissatisfaction with the present orders of his Providence. We cannot suppose it to be his pleasure, that we should fly to him, driven by disgust or terror or any passionateness, but rather that we should make him our constant stay. We should confide in him with the spirit of filial attachment, and not make Him a mere refuge and last resource from the very dispensations that He has appointed. We should confide in him, not as if all else were vanity, but as if He sent nothing

to be in vain ; — not considering others to be nothing, but only that He is high over them all. I am afraid that we are apt to fall into an error on this point, and to imagine that we are trusting the Almighty, when we are only mistrusting the present scene, the companions he has given us, the events that betide us, the world he has placed us in. The Psalmist in the passage before us, smarting under the sense of private injuries, might easily have overstated the wickedness of his generation ; and we ourselves, when disappointed and bereft and stricken, dwell with the natural exaggerations of grief upon human fragility and the world's emptiness and the small number of the well-deserving that has now been made smaller still. And then, if we invoke aid from the great source of strength, the petition will be in danger of having more in it of our personal misery and the despair of earthly good, than of grateful assurance in the mercifulness that we implore.

I invite you to follow me through a simple train of thought, such as is suggested to us by the very language of the text. There are the faithful ; and they fail ; and we require help.

1. There are the faithful ; — many of them ; — some very near to us and well known, and multitudes whom it is for others to rejoice in, if not for us. The names of some are brought out from the retired circle which they had secretly brightened and silently blest, only by the tidings of their loss and the expressions of a general sympathy ; — while others did not need the rumor of a melancholy

event to publish their worth to strangers, nor the pain of separation to remind their friends of the love and honor in which that worth was held. There are the faithful, — a constant and long succession of them; not indeed the unerring, not indeed the faultless; — for them you must go out of the world; — but those whom the scripture goes so far as to call “the perfect,” and “the upright.” Question them, and their answers will be according to truth. Agree with them, and their dealings will be according to righteousness. Merciful men, whose souls are not so taken up with their own interests as to be careless of their neighbor’s; just men, whose integrity is neither to be stolen nor bribed nor wrested from them; honorable men, who have not been known to betray a trust, or evade an obligation. They are quickened by good affections while they are ruled by principles; and therefore their lives exhibit that most difficult of attainments,—consistency. They are ready to all the work for which God has made them able. They are not anxious to spare themselves in the service of their times and their kind; while every nearer claim is sacredly fulfilled. You may take to your confidence the inheritors of so noble a nature. You may contemplate for your own improvement such specimens of your race. You are safe with them. You need not fear for their probity or their good will. Their hearts will not alter nor their endeavors abate, till the great change strikes them; and even that, though it breaks the wheel at the cistern of life, and cuts abruptly short

their intercourse with surrounding things, cannot make them different from what they were before. It has no power over their characters, whatever change it may have wrought upon the circumstances of their condition, and though it has separated them so absolutely from all mortal ties. It cannot reverse what they have been. It cannot efface what they have done from the book of God's remembrance, or our own. It cannot put upon them any dishonor. Let it come then when it must, and translate them — for that is all it can — to the higher destinies of an activity that shall never cease.

2. And it will come. They “fail from among the children of men.” In youth often; in the midst of their days often; inevitably at a later period, if they are detained to see it. And we can bear this; for the grave neither sullies nor hides them, as they lie down in it. The seal is now set upon their fidelity and the crown upon their immortal hopes.

But they may die young! Yes. In the fulness of their ability! Yes. When the fruits of their endeavors were just gathering ripely in! We must admit it. At the very moment when the world had the most to attract, and friends had the most to lose! It is indeed so. And you will tell me that this is as mysterious to contemplate, as it is afflicting to bear. Mysterious we may certainly call it; for what less must appear, to such limited creatures as we, all the designs of the Infinite God? — But hear a parable. An old man and a youth stood musing upon the doom of an early death many ages ago, before the

light of the glorious gospel rose upon the nations. I can see them now. No two other such forms had ever been presented to the admiration of mankind. They stood together by the rivers of Egypt and upon the plains of the East, each of them a wanderer from his own peculiar land. The elder had the garb of a prophet. He seemed marked out to be the primeval instructor of his kind. He was full of years already ; and his words fell from him in praise of long life, and a promise of it to the good, and in lamentation for those who were not permitted to live out, as he termed it, all their days. He discoursed largely on it as a motive to wisdom and goodness, that so one would continue longer upon the earth. He appeared to measure in some degree the rewards of virtue, by calculations in time and space. I dare not call it a mistake in that divine old man ; for I look upon him as preparing the way for the confirmation of an endless existence. His frozen notion of long life floated out and melted in the great idea of life forevermore. — The young man was near and gazed upon the patriarch. His looks were radiant with intelligence and resolution. — He was soldier and sage, moralist and bard, in the same person. Among the many things that he said in reply to his venerable companion was this, “ they whom the gods love die young.”

The two persons now described represent the opposite spirits of the Hebrew and the Grecian belief. I will not say which approaches the most nearly to the Christian faith ; but only this, that if the more an-

cient word prepared the way for the doctrine of a future life, the later one seems to have gained an instinct of that precious truth. They met again, towards the time of the Saviour's coming, when the Hebrew learning and the Grecian culture were found together at Alexandria ; and they had then agreed to express this beautiful sentiment, from the mouth of a Jew and in the language of Plato : " though the righteous be soon overtaken with death, yet shall he be at rest. Wisdom is the gray hair unto men, and an unspotted life is old age. Being made perfect in a short time, he fulfilled a long time. The righteous that is dead shall condemn the ungodly which are living, and youth that is soon perfected the many years of the wicked."*

The faithful fail from among the children of men. So far are they from being spared for their faithfulness, that the natural regrets and fears of human hearts are ever ready to complain that such are the most liable to be taken. But neither is this the case any more than the contrary. The desolator makes no distinctions. He goes where he is sent ; and his company is impartially collected from every grade of character and every period of days. He is a solemn visitant. Even when he comes to those whom he could not much longer pass by ; or to those who were continued here too little while to leave any record of themselves behind ; or to those who have left no very good one, — passing away

* Wisdom of Solomon, iv. 7, 9, 13, 16.

without much having been accomplished for their own improvement or others' good ; — under any circumstances, he wears a solemn aspect. He brings with him painful remembrances and anxious apprehensions. He crowds the heart with melancholy thoughts of our frailty and of our end. What shall we say, then, when the widely known, the eminently endowed, the usefully employed, the dearly prized, are swept away from the sphere of their duties and the objects of their regard ? We must feel that we have then peculiar need of being sustained and comforted.

3. And who shall supply this necessity ? Friends will approach with their sympathy, and that may do something to sooth us. The recollection of their dispositions and deeds will rise up, and that will do something to encourage us. The common cares of life and the claims of the living will interpose with their merciful distractions. The necessity of submission to what cannot be reversed may first subdue and then tranquillize the soul. But what are these all, if the blessed sanctions of religion are not brought in to blend with the expressions of human friendship, with the tribute to the departed, with the calls of duty and with the decrees of fate ? What are they all, if there be no promise beyond mortality, and no aid from beyond the stars ? “ Help, Lord.”

If you had lost the fulness that you once had of this world's goods, you might hope to win it back

again by a diligent hand and a more prosperous fortune, or you might learn to account the portion that is left to be wealth enough. If you had lost your health, you might look to recover it by the skill of the physician and patient remedies. If you had lost some of the pleasures that were very valuable to you among the every-day solaces of life, you might open new sources in the place of those that were dry, or take an increased interest in those that are yet left. If you had lost your courage, and spirits, and heart's content, you might repair them among the diversions of society, or by a change of pursuits or an interval of repose. But when death strikes in upon the circle of our attachments, ordinary consolations are out of place and ordinary succor is unavailing. The sorrow that does not spring forth from the ground must have more than earthly appliances to meet it. Help, Lord ; with the doctrine of thy word, with the influences of thy spirit, with the angel of thy consolations ! Clear away our doubtfulness, and banish our dread, give patience, give fortitude, give peace !

The minds of my hearers will have gone before me in giving the reason for the selection of this morning's text. A "faithful" man has ceased from among us ; a fellow-worshipper with you from his boyish days ; one who had the welfare of our society warmly at heart, and whose substantial worth would have enriched the communion of any church in the world. His position before the public makes it not

improper thus to allude to him publicly. And yet I should be afraid to pronounce any set eulogy, and ashamed to pronounce any exaggerated one, of so sincere and unpretending a man, who would

“Do good by stealth, and blush to find it fame.”

I have described him already, and meant to do so, in what has been said of the “faithful;” — alas, that he too has failed so soon from among the children of men !

Belonging to a profession that is happy beyond every other in the personal regards of those among whom it is exercised, — that demands more than any other the highest exercises of prudence, self-possession, a conscientious diligence, and entire trust-worthiness, he was wanting in nothing to the claims of an intelligent community or to the desires of his friends. His understanding was of a firm and elevated order ; and his feelings, though remarkably restrained and guarded in all their visible expressions, were expansive enough to hold all the objects to which it was possible for him to do good. The cares of his laborious and responsible calling, though devotedly assumed, did not withdraw him from the liberal pursuits of a scholar ; and what was more important, did not prevent him from entering with ardor into all the projects which he thought wise for the general improvement. He was public spirited. He showed himself a great friend to the poor, and was constant-

ly seeking out something for their relief and moral advancement. He was soberly active in the movement for temperance. He was distinguished by the interest he took in the cause of popular education. Quietly busy, modestly useful, enterprising but never extravagant, he was willing to spend all the stores of his rich and active mind in the service of his generation ; — a service, where they who received it should be the humblest individuals, and he who rendered it should be unknown. He was such an enemy of display and ostentation, that to be and not to seem, might pass for the motto of his life.

It were not to be excused, if I omitted to say that he was a devout man ; a Christian, from inquiry and conviction and the action of his own thoughts and a deep-seated reverence and affectionateness for what is divine. He did not trifle with sacred things in his familiar talk, nor slight them among his researches, nor question them with an unbecoming lightness, nor censure them with a hasty judgment. He was none of those shallow reasoners, who start petty objections against everlasting truths ; and he was equally far from the subservient following of any human authority. He reflected within himself and decided for himself, and the result was religiousness.

It may be permitted to say these things of him in this house of our devotions, which he frequented in the spirit of faith and worship and not for form's sake, and where we shall see his face no more. He is beyond the hearing of the words that would now do

him respect, and high out of the reach of the mourners that bewail him. He has gone to render his homage in a heavenly temple and with holier companions, and where there is no more distress.

“The loss of a finished man,” it was once said, “is not easily supplied.” Let not the example of a “faithful” one be easily forgotten.

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